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Winter Beast

by Margaret L. Carter

Beneath the wind that moaned around the keep, a deep-voiced howl assailed Inga's ears. From the window, she stared down at the massive shape that prowled outside the gate. The nearly full moon showed her a form all too familiar by now, gray-streaked white against the snow, vaguely bear-like but twice the size of any bear. "Close the shutters before we freeze," called her father's weak voice from the bed.

She obeyed and walked over to gaze at him. With the window shuttered, the musty odor of illness thickened in the candlelit bedchamber.

Her father, Lord Aron, raised himself on one elbow and glared at her. "Why do you watch that thing every night? Isn't it bad enough just knowing it's there?"

"I'm through watching, Father. I'm ready to do something about it." She laid the back of her hand against his forehead, dismayed to find him still flushed with fever.

He flinched away from her touch. "Stop fussing over me. What do you mean, do something? We've done all we can, and what good was it? Look at me!" He gestured toward his wounded leg, torn open by the monster's fangs three nights past. Few people who challenged the creature survived. The healer's herb-lore, aided by Inga's spellcraft, had salvaged the mutilated limb, but the fever persisted.

Inga sat on a stool at the bedside. "True, facing the Snowbeast in combat has been worse than useless. It's time to try another way." Her fingers twisted around each other in her lap; she knew how badly her father would react to her suggestion. "I've found a spell to deal with it."

"Magic? Against that?" The words came out as a hoarse croak. His sunken cheeks made him look like an old man, though only in his fiftieth year.

"What else is left? Fighting is obviously hopeless." Arrows failed to penetrate the beast's pelt, so that long-range weapons had no effect. Swords and spears only scratched it, and anyone who ventured within arm's reach risked being ripped apart. It left some challengers bleeding to death on the snow, while others it slew and dragged away to devour at leisure. Trackers often found their bones and shredded clothes on the mountainside. "I'm sure the thing is a creature of magic. Only magiccraft can defeat it."

"And who's to cast this spell, daughter? You, I suppose?" Inga inclined her head in silent acknowledgment. She was, after all, the only mage in the keep. Lord Aron's eyes narrowed. "From a circle in your

tower?"

She swallowed a lump. "No, father. This spell must be cast face to face." Or so she thought, as far as she understood the archaic language in the crumbling volume where she'd found the cantrip. "I have to look into its eyes."

"I won't allow --" The words dissolved in a fit of coughing.

Supporting him with an arm around his shoulders, Inga held a cup of herbal tea to his lips. He accepted one sip, then pushed her away. "Out of the question! I won't let you kill yourself."

"I don't plan to die. Fire holds it at bay. Long enough for me to finish the incantation, at least." She set the mug aside and started to wipe his chin with a handkerchief.

He grabbed the cloth to finish the task. "I'm not helpless, you know. And as your father and Lord, I forbid this madness."

"While you're bedridden," she said, "I'm the Lady of this hold."

"You think my men will let you set foot outside the gates against my orders?" The question ended in another cough.

She proffered the mug again, hoping he hadn't noticed the bitter taint of the potion she'd added. This time, he clutched it in both hands and downed the hot drink. "Father, I believe they'll do anything to end this scourge."

Handing her the empty cup, he shook his head and sank back on the pillow. "I've lost your mother and your brother -- my only son. How can I let you throw your life away?" His words evoked the day when the first monster, the She-Beast, had appeared -- and the image of her mother's ravaged corpse on the red-stained snow....

A shriek ripped through the freezing air. Inga rushed out the gate, just behind the guards who responded to her mother's cry. The She-Beast, with bloody tears oozing from its eyes, loomed over the body. Rolf, only nine years old, stared at his mother's twisted form, her small ornamental dagger still clutched in her fist. The snowball he'd been shaping dropped from his hand. Before the guards' charge could reach the She-Beast, it enveloped Rolf in its shaggy forelegs. It -- she -- cradled him against her breast, keening, with her bear-like head bowed, and humbered away. Not daring to loose arrows at the creature while she carried the screaming boy, the guards could only watch. A howl streamed behind the She-Beast as she fled....

Inga forced the memory into the depths of her mind. Impatient for action, she returned to the window and

cracked the shutters to peer out. The gray-white hulk shambled back and forth, lifting its muzzle to roar at the barred gates. The noise, both terrible and desolate, made her chest constrict and her stomach cramp. The eyes above the dagger-length fangs seemed fixed on her.

Night after night, that roar haunted the darkness. Sometimes, after she finally found shelter in sleep, it invaded her dreams. Just the night before, she had dreamed that the cry melted into words, an almost-human voice calling her name: "Inga! Inga, let me in!"

The Beast charged toward the keep and veered away, as if deflected by an invisible wall. A half-grown cub at its first appearance, soon after its mother's death, it had become larger and fiercer every winter.

"I have to do this," Inga said. "No more innocent people must die like Mother and Rolf." Her brother, snatched six years previously, his body never found. She watched Lord Aron, waiting for the potion to affect him.

His voice grew feebler. "Do magical weapons have any better chance than normal ones? We slew the mother, but--"

"Not exactly," said Inga. "She was dying when she first appeared." The She-Beast had looked sickly from the beginning. Her fur had been patchy, the skin underneath raw with sores, her eyes constantly weeping, her paws leaving bloody prints in the snow.

"The She-Beast would have died that season anyway, I think. This young one only grows stronger every year," Inga pointed out.

"That proves there's no sense in risking yourself," her father said. "No one should challenge the Beast again. We should abandon the keep --take our household elsewhere. In one day, we can get far out of its range."

"How long do you intend to stay 'elsewhere'? And where, exactly, could we go?" She cast a nervous glance toward the window, where the creature's howls still reverberated.

"We could appeal to the Duke --"

"Who isn't in the least likely to bestow a new holding upon you, when -- as he'll see it -- you weren't able to defend this one. Father, do you want our family to become beggars?"

He shifted his head on the sweat-stained pillow. "Better than to stay here and watch that thing kill anyone who ventures outdoors after dark during winter." He sighed. "Where did you find this incantation? Your great-aunt's books, I suppose."

She nodded. Aunt Gerda, who had started Inga down the path of sorcery, had bequeathed her a collection of scrolls and folios, many of them generations old.

"Do you understand what you've read?" he whispered. "Do you even know what this spell will do?"

She turned away from his challenging glare.

"Just as I feared." His eyelids drooped. "Strike it

dead at your feet? Or drive it away, so we'll never know whether it -" His voice trailed off, and his eyes closed altogether.

"Goodnight, Father." She kissed his forehead, then hurried out of the room before tears could blind her.

In her own chamber she changed into thick breeches and tunic, fur-lined boots, and a heavy, hooded cloak. She carried only a torch, fortified by magic. She prayed it would burn long enough to keep the monster from attacking while she recited the brief spell.

The two men-at-arms guarding the door cast dubious looks at her but made no attempt to interfere. She circled to the small postern gate and slipped out.

The beast heard or sensed her, of course, and charged into view with a roar. At a whispered charm from Inga, the torch flame flared to twice its normal size and brightness. The beast slid to a halt in the snow, looking almost comical for an instant.

That illusion ceased when it reared to its full height and howled again. Inga forced her eyes away from the fangs and taloned paws. She couldn't allow fear to tangle her words. The shrieking wind lashed her face with snow. Without magic, the fire she carried wouldn't have lasted more than a few seconds.

Squinting against the sting of the blizzard, she began her chant. After the first line, the creature froze in mid-roar. She stared into its glowing eyes. Their expression looked almost -- puzzled. Almost human.

No, that's an illusion, maybe even a trick. Mustn't get distracted. She raised her voice, shouting the cryptic syllables at the top of her lungs. The beast lunged at her. She thrust the torch at its gaping jaws. It cringed back, just out of arms' reach. The rhythm of Inga's chant didn't falter. *It's afraid -- this is working!* Frightening the creature, though, wasn't enough. Even if it fled, the countryside wouldn't be safe. It might return.

Have faith, she admonished herself, building to the climax of the spell. Yes -- something was happening. The thing doubled over, clutching its belly. *It's in pain.*

Seizing the advantage, Inga closed upon it, brandishing her fire as she invoked the magic. The creature's howl changed to a whine of agony. Its claws raked its own pelt and ripped the flesh beneath. It curled upon itself and rolled on the snow as if its hide were aflame. Finally, shuddering, too spent to struggle, it lay keening on the ground and gazed up at Inga.

Its wide eyes glowed like dying embers. She saw moisture seeping from them -- tears? For a second she felt sorry for it. *No, I can't stop now!* She brought the incantation to a thunderous finish.

Tendrils of smoke arose from the beast's fur. They curdled into a cloud that momentarily veiled the creature from sight. When it began to dissipate, Inga saw the beast's form ripple like an image on wind-ruffled water.

Before her eyes, it melted into a shapeless mass. Would it vanish? Instead, the outline began to coalesce into a new shape. When the smoke cleared completely, a beast no longer lay on the ground.

Instead, she saw an unconscious boy in his mid-teens, naked, with tangled blond hair. In his face she glimpsed traces of her father as a young man and of her dead

mother.

She fell to her knees beside the boy. "Rolf!" She clutched his cold arms.

He opened his eyes, stared at her blankly for a few seconds, and spoke her name.

Margaret Carter [Website: <http://members.aol.com/MLCamp/vampcrpt.htm>] writes: *The image of a castle besieged by a monster was inspired by Beowulf. My ending probably owes something to Gardner's novel Grendel, in which the creature appeals to the reader's sympathy. I have always enjoyed stories in which monsters turn out to be not so monstrous after all. Another reason for writing this tale was for practice in very short fiction, something I have a lot of trouble with. I'm fairly pleased with the final result.*

prehistoric Utah sandbar

by Christopher McKittrick

wall of rocky flesh
molded ages before
my eyes
gaze drink imagine...

your hollow eyes
consider my frailty
here soon gone

tower of mass in motion
acceleration slowed by nothing

trees your toothpicks
framed eternally massive
by lush green then
carbon black now
foliage
to bless this day for me

I bow my head for you
reptile royalty
ageless majestic

your tomorrows locked in rock